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Locust and Marlin

by J.L. Williams (Shearsman Books, 2014)

Reviewed by Greg Thomas

Locust and Marlin opens on the image of an alighting heron:

Imagine a great silence
whose wings touch no branches.

Imagine a space demarcated
by lack of sound. ('Heron,' 11)

It's a familiar image to anyone who lives in Edinburgh—near the Water of Leith at least—and its synaesthetic rendering sets the tone for a work which seems to strain inwardly at the boundaries of quotidian sensory experience, attempting to assign it some deeper, archetypal significance. This pressure often fractures the image into Surrealist dreamscape or language-fragment, placing Williams in a lineage of poet-shaman-types which we might even trace back to Dylan Thomas and the New Romantics.

To the extent that they unfold in any fixed location, the poems seem to shift between the sodden Edinburgh of 'Nor Loch'—"The fountain flooded. | The rubbed-out castle | aching above the graveyard, its bones soaking | in the eidolon of water" (25)—and the poet's New Jersey childhood, all waltzers and tackle-shops:

In my father's old bait and tackle shop
giant fish dangle from hooks near the men
grinning from ear to ear in the grainy,
soiled photographs clipped from newspapers ('Locust and Marlin,' 29)

But most of the scenes inhabited become symbolic dreamscapes, stripped of the physical and temporal restrictions of "place" in a naturalistic sense. Above all, Williams seems concerned with naming or figuring something like "home," and with accommodating within that concept some intimation or acknowledgement of destruction; even with acknowledging overlaps between a desire for homecoming and for a kind of absolving annihilation (the titular locust is a harbinger of destruction, especially in the context of the prefixed Book of Revelation quote; but there's also a locus in it).

Williams's talismans of home are the stone and the shell: inanimate objects animated by sensory engagement; Bachelard seems a key reference point here. The stone is a small piece of the material world which accommodates human invocations of order: can be made to signify on our terms, while retaining a certain palliative immutability:

So much in each stone.

The history of the world and more—
the blood of it, the vision of it.

See, here, the dreams of stone:
bone, flesh, wing, seed. ('Corpus,' 66)

The shell is a dark enclosure which can be converted into a home: from a symbol like the one in 'Hateful Shell'—"Snail of the sea, | Mouth like a bag, | sucks up the slumbering parrotfish. || stabs it alive" (40)—into the "mouth-like home" of the clam who "unfrets his valves" in 'Creation' (36); or the classically proportioned, vaulting space of 'The Dark Spiral and the Spiralling Light':

[...] I dream of your
perfectly proportioned,
masterfully curving
rooms upon rooms—
dark dreams and dreams of light. (53)

Threatening to unfret all these constructions, however, is an ineluctable movement towards destruction, engaged with on a simultaneously cosmic and personal scale. 'Tonight' binds those scales together, solar explosions rendering the becalmed boat picked out in the next verse an eerie portent:

In outer space cells of the sun
will collapse in explosions of gold gas
while dark clear holes open
where the heat is intense.

Somewhere a boat on an ocean
will rock back and forth on a slow wave
making a sound like the gentle
breath of a child. (28)

'Sand' casts its vision further forward, envisaging a ravaged world unfit for physical or symbolic inhabitance:

What will be in a hundred,
a thousand, a million years?

Sand, and likely wind
mouthing sky. (35)

As if to find a way of living with these intimations of the Real (if you like), ‘Locust King’ intimates with the agent of destruction itself, in what again seems a Revelation context:

From the height at which I drift in starless night
I look out on the cities of men undone,
my face a man’s, my body almost horse,
my crown as like a cage as like a crown.

How many times I’ve been a home for names,
the past a constant pain not easily forgot.

[...]

When I exhale the dust obscures my view.
Immortal as I am it is a curse
to be without you for all time. (37)

The father-deity figure alluded to in ‘Like Phaeton’ also seems significant here. Partly an eidolon of the poet’s own father, mentioned earlier in the poem, it’s perhaps also a way of naming and containing an unnameable destructive force: something sublime and eviscerating, a bottomless home for names. He is “less of a figure and more of a point | around which light flickers” (‘Like Phaeton,’ 16). There are chinks and flickers like this all over the place; cracks in screens and doors ajar, gesturing towards darkness or an immolating light.

It’s interesting to trace the shifts between the collection’s more apocalyptic overtures and the negotiations of private space in poems like ‘Hotel,’ which, in that broader context, endow habitual actions and gestures with a morbid compulsion:

We enter a room with cabinets,
a chest of drawers.

My first instinct
to violate
each secret space. (39)

This yearning to penetrate the boundaries of the immediate sensory environment seems quietly self-destructive: a yearning to get beyond the self pegged in place by that environment. Countering this though, there’s also a sense of physical rootedness in the unseen which grounds and secures the subject: “You do not have to feel alone. | The trees will open their barks for you” (‘Because You Are,’ 54). “What we see of the circle; an arc. | Below is there another half vibrating? [...] Listen with your blossom of a heart.” (‘Horizon,’ 59).

This brings us on to the central image of the collection, which is not the locust or the marlin—though animals of all kinds abound—but the river, a material force which buoys you up but ultimately washes you away. ‘November’s Song,’ ‘A Tender Still’ and ‘Resurrection’ are all key sequences in this vein, about baptism and sacrifice; later on there’s a whole triptych of poems (so called) about rivers: as sites of martyrdom, insemination and internment. It’s quite beautiful and strange, and the ecclesiastical connotations of the presentation seem significant:

Here the pine brooms feather forehead, chest.
The amber tea of rivers steeped with pine roots weaves
A mazy tapestry to colour bodies, make them
smell of cardamom in wooden casks. (‘River Poem II / Internment,’ 56)

Ultimately, the river is another image of home, but one which is always unfolding: “We | are mostly water and all water || is a thing that seeks a home but has no home | except that carved in earth by seeking” (‘All Water,’ 23).

For me, one of two of these pieces go too quickly for the jugular in their straining for vision, and become a little overwrought. But generally, Williams’s divinations retain a seductive opacity:

You lower the cage of dead rabbits.
When you return ropes are wound round
the rubbery bodies of black eels.

The heron’s stillness, his samurai coif,
his necklace of grey feathers. (‘Sargasso Sea,’ 33)

Penultimate poem ‘Son’ is in this same vein of esoteric prophecy:

God isn't here to stake out dry tongues,
to lay claim to scorched fields of hay.

I stand in a field, rubber soles melting.
The wind is a cow.

There are words all around me, though everyone
is silent, threatening
to open my chest. (76)

It's redolent with symbolic value but remains sufficiently hermetic, tucked away in its shell, to retain autonomy and force. To similar effect, Williams often develops an incantatory or aphasic syntax which unbinds potentially too-heavy sentiment (and contributes to the musicality of the poems in performance):

You smile.
The heart breathes.
You stand up for the first time since you were dead.
You smile.
The heart is transformed by the realisation that you are alive.
The heart breathes.
You smile.
The heart breathes.
The heart breathes.
The heart breathes. ("...where wings have no memory of wings," 43)

In 'Two Legs, Two Arms,' the pressure enacted on language by repetition seems to build to a crescendo of violence, and grammar is dismembered, creating some of the most memorable effects in the book:

It wasn't only as if
and when

and then and then

a white flower
a thousand then

a thousand flowers

and in their midst

an arm, a leg (45)

It's best when some gnostic process seems captured in the process of unfurling, rather than having its connotations enumerated: when there remains a kind of insolubility to the language which is also a kind of immediacy. But there's no way around the fact that this is a collection of grandiose, visionary poems about the nature of life and death. And it's often hugely benefited by the ambition of its scope:

We have a small space of time in which to touch.
There is a veil and beyond that
an old metal ornate grating
and the heat comes from there and the dreams.

[...]

The ink runs out, or runs dry.
I learned to live, and now I am learning to die.
(‘The Veil,’ 62)

The heron descends again in closing poem ‘Revelation,’ drawing a veil over the sequence. ‘He starves, but it is beautiful’ (79). It's a suitably mysterious utterance on which to close.

Countersonnets

by Nat Raha (Contraband Books, 2013)

Reviewed by Karen Veitch

Nat Raha's *Countersonnets* should be read on a sunny day, with the curtains wide open. The collection commands light, engaging in optical and linguistic play in which the sonnet form is written through and exposed as a game of the eyes, with the aim to "resignify our vision." The eight-page opening poem, 'Quarter,' establishes the collection's method, linking physical to semantic movement, as we begin in "lock-motion spun / held close about this crater." The form of the poem (and of the collection as a whole) underpins the project of countering the traditional sonnet as an exposure and redirection of the eyes